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ABSTRACT

One convenient and time saving method of evaluating student compositions employs a tape recorder and cassettes. In addition to once or twice weekly classroom sessions spent on traditional composition techniques, the instructor regularly schedules individual tutoring sessions with each student. One to two days before the individual session, the student turns in an essay on an assigned topic. The teacher reads the essay carefully, tapes extensive comments on a cassette, and returns the paper and the cassette to the student. By conference time the student has seen the corrected essay and has heard detailed comments on the paper's general quality. Benefits of taped comments include relieving the instructor of long, written evaluations and providing verbal reinforcement for student writing. Previous experience with cassette correcting was reported in Anne Klammer's "Cassettes in the Classroom," and the difficulties he encountered have been largely overcome through modern technology. The technique of cassette correcting works equally well with elementary and advanced composition classes. (AEA)

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CASSETTE COMMENTARY: AN AP PROACH TO THE TEACHING OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

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It is generally acknowledged by most teachers of literature and composition that this generation of college students either doesn't, can't, or won't read. They're more attuned to electronic visual images and the spoken word. They look and they listen. They don't devour books with the same relish that their brothers and sister did a generation ago.

It was with this state of affairs in mind that I recently tried to figure out some method of "speaking" to my composition students about their work, without the exhausting ordeal of extensive written comments on their essays -- some method that was unique, that appealed to them, and that was ultimately a valuable learning experience. I found a method. It employs a tape recorder and cassettes. I'll explain how it works shortly.

I meet my composition students in the classroom only once or

twice a week for about 50 minutes per session. This time is spent teaching such traditional compositional techniques as inductive and deductive reasoning, theme development, organization, sentence and paragraph transitions, and argumentation. In addition to the whole essay, I drill on things like sentence style and variety, punctuation, basic grammar, diction, and proofreading techniques. A good deal of effort is spent on the analysis of student papers. I ditto or Xerox a group of essays from the class -- essays that are patently bad or remarkably readable -- and turn the students loose on them. As most of us know, students tend to be far better critics of their peers' work than they are of their own. Thus, seeing their friends' flaws gives them confidence in their own abilities and teaches them a good deal about style, tone, organization, and syntax.

I might add here that the battle between tutorial versus classroom instruction in writing has raged for years.[1] I have had a few great moments in large lecture classes, but after a quarter of a century of teaching composition I've found that the tutorial system works best for me. Personally, I like the one-on-one method. I find my students less intimidated by their peers -- and me -- in the relative privacy of my office. Showing, rather than telling, is an effective teaching tool. And the immediacy of an on-the-spot revision of a problematical clause, sentence, or paragraph seems more productive for my students than my marginal comments and lengthy preces which the students digest, or attempt to digest, without the benefit of my explanations and

graphic examples.

Classroom discussion and the usual give-and-take battles over student essays, however, are the end result of my idea about "getting to" my composition class. My idea exploits this generation's ability (or propensity) to listen rather than to read. My system works this way. Twenty-four hours (48 is preferable) before a student comes to my office for a regularly-scheduled conference, he hands in an essay on a topic I have assigned at the beginning of the week. The assignments are very specific and touch on the problems in composition that plague every generation of writing students. Incidentally, a week's class is devoted only to one kind of essay or only to one specific compositional problem. I then read the essay carefully, marking the obvious flaws in grammar, syntax, spelling, and the like. Then I tape on a cassette an extentive comment about the paper. Almost everyone on this campus either owns a tape recorder or has access to one. My comments are directed primarily to content rather than form. That is, I speak about the development of ideas, transitions, supportive evidence, style, tone, and reader interest. Issues of form (the mechanics of composition) are visually apparent to the student in the editing I do before the student and I go over the paper together in conference, and thus needs little verbalization on my part. The paper and the cassette comment are left in a prearranged spot for the student to pick up and listen to before coming to conference.

By conference time, then, the student has (a) seen his essay and made note of its mechanical flaws and strengths, and (b) has

heard my detailed comments on the general quality of the paper's content. The cassette, of course, becomes the student's permanent record -- a pocket-sized repository of his strengths and weaknesses, as well as a permanent and continuing record of his semester's progress. I have a recorder in my office so that the student and I can listen to my comments whenever needed. Many students, I've found, take notes on the remarks I've recorded so we can review plaguy issues during the conference.

A typical comment might contain remarks like these: "In paragraph two, Joe, you've failed to develop the thesis statement fully. And there's a choppy transition between your introduction (which reads quite well, by the way) and the body of your essay." Or, "Your second example on page three, Anne, is neither pertinent to your argument or very convincing. Why don't you consider using the Three Mile Island incident as evidence to support the statements you've made in the third and fourth paragraphs on the previous page?" Or, "Look at page four, Tom. Notice how the paragraphs there seem to float in space? They're not lashed down to anything. Remember what we did in class last Monday about the business of transitions? Try using something simple like 'in the second place' or 'moreover' to get through that rough area of the paper?"

Not only does my taped comment provide a student with a long and detailed note on his paper (far longer than the examples cited above) and provide a kind of intimate commentary on his essay, but taping lifts the burden from the instructor as well. Long written evaluations (précis) take time. And they are often casually

read, unappreciated, or discarded. It's a good deal easier to talk about a paper, especially if the writing course is large and is being taught largely on a personal conference or tutorial basis. Moreover, the conversational tone of an instructor's comments tends to elicit more response from the students. Without cattering wholeheartedly to their lust for the spoken word, I provide them with verbal reinforcement -- something which many of them sorely need at one stage or another of their college writing careers. The cost of two or three cassettes (each student buys his own -- a few hours' worth) is, proverbially, money well spent.

Others before me have tried the cassette approach to teaching composition. Prof. Enno Klammer's "Cassettes in the Classroom" lists some of the approaches I've tried in my courses.[2] His complaints that cassette correcting can be "cumbersome" and "time-consuming" are well taken.[3] His concern about the "difficulty [of] dictating into a mike"[4] is mine as well. In the half decade since Professor Klammer's essay, however, modern technology has turned the once bulky tape recorder into a lightweight and practically foolproof device. No longer do I find that carrying a pocket-sized recorder is a burden, nor do I find that my time is chewed up by cassettes any more than it was when I edited and then typed out long critiques of a student's essay. And dictating is really little more intimidating than lecturing. Actually, the conversational tone I try to maintain in all my cassette comments is intended to show -- to tell -- my students that some of the strategies of the spoken word are things they ought to consider in their own

writing. Prof. Klammer and I do agree, though, on the major bugaboo of all writing instructors: there is no easy and speedy way to correct, edit, and evaluate student writing. That is, there is no speedy way if the job is to be done precisely and well.

Now this scheme of mine might appear to lend itself more comfortably to elementary composition -- to a kind of first year writing program at the college level. But I've discovered that what works well for the talented writers works equally well for those who have not leaped the barrier between rudimentary composition and the more precise and specialized challenges of advanced composition. What I mean by advanced composition, however, is not really the premise of this essay. Suffice it to say that in too many cases, I find my advanced composition students need a great deal of compositional refreshing before I can consider them ready for the hurdles of more sophisticated writing. The only way I know of weeding out the beginners from those who have some talent is to demand -- prior to the start of the semester -- samples of their work. By careful pruning I can then find a workable number of serious writers who do not need work in such basic areas as sentence structure and transitions, paragraphing, thesis control, focus, and the framing of a distinctive style.

Like all schemes to improve the quality of what we do in teaching composition, and to keep vital a difficult art, my taping system requires constant refinement and modification. But I've discovered that the spoken word -- especially to a generation of orally-oriented young men and women -- is a far more efficient and

personalized approach to the teaching of composition than is the written commentary so often seen in classes of both elementary and advanced writing. Finally, my scheme carries the tang of newness. All of us who labor in the compositional vineyards can stand a bit of that.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Judith Budz and Terry Graber, "Tutorial versus Classroom in Freshman English," CE, 37 (1976), 654-656.

[2]Enno Klammer, "Cassettes in the Classroom," CE, 35 (1973), 179-181.

[3]Ibid., 180.

[4]Ibid.